Technical Assistance Bulletin

You Can Prepare Easy-To-Read Materials

Easy-to-read materials are for everyone — from business executives to high school students. Everyone benefits from materials that are clear and concise. Here's a five-step approach to make sure that your target audience understands your message.

1. Determine Who You Want To Reach

The first step is to identify your target audience. The more closely you understand and relate to their concerns, the more likely they are to listen to what you have to say. Before you begin you must clearly define your target audience and understand their needs. Gather information such as demographics, prevailing attitudes and practices, and media and buying habits. Find out who are credible sources of information and what channels can be used to deliver your message.

> *To make sure your target audience understands your message:*
>
> - *Determine who you want to reach*
> - *Decide what you want them to do*
> - *Choose the right reading level*
> - *Write easy-to-read materials*
> - *Create clear graphics.*

If another group has already researched your topic, you may be able to find out what your audience thinks about a specific issue. For example, you may be surprised to find that others have already talked to clinic practitioners about barriers that prevent them from addressing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse issues with their clients. A review of this material would be helpful before you write a brochure for nurses to use with clinic patients. If no such information is available, consider conducting some research.

Case Study:

Use Information From Others and Save Time

You can learn a lot from existing research and save time and money. Staff from a children's museum were interested in designing an exhibit on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use prevention for youngsters aged 8 to 12. A call to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) revealed that two national surveys and the "Be Smart, Don't Start" and "Just Say No!" campaigns had selected the same audience. The children's museum used results of previous focus group research and evaluations to guide their development efforts.

Before You Begin...

■ Preparing easy-to-read materials is just one step in the communications process. Before you develop any materials, you must define your target audience, determine their needs, set measurable objectives, and develop an evaluation plan.

■ To define your target audience and learn more about them, take advantage of existing sources of information such as State and Federal alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse prevention agencies and, specifically, NCADI and grantees supported by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP).

See the Resources list on page 6. Additionally, you may wish to contact polling companies and/or depositories of polling information such as the Roper Center, P.O. Box 440, Storrs, CT 06268.

■ If no information is available, consider conducting your own qualitative research. Focus groups, individual interviews, central location intercept interviews, theater testing, and self-administered questionnaires are all valid ways of gaining insight about what works with a particular audience. See Resources for other sources of information on qualitative research.

2. Decide What You Want Your Audience To Do

You should know exactly what you want your audience to do after they have read your message. If you don't know, how will they? Before you begin writing, list the action steps you'd like readers to take. When you finish writing, have someone else read it through to identify the action steps. You'll know if your message got across.

Also, think about how the materials will be used. In what settings will they be distributed? Do you need a cover letter or instructions for the person who will give the materials to the client? If your material is self-instructional, you may need to be even more specific in your instructions.

3. Choose the Right Reading Level

For the general public, writing at the sixth grade reading level is usually safe. You can check if you're on target by using a readability test such as the SMOG, the Fog-Gunning Index, or the Fry Readability Formula. SMOG is the readability formula used by CSAP. To determine the approximate reading level of a publication, you need a passage with 30 sentences. Choose 10 consecutive sentences at the beginning, middle, and end of the piece. Count all the words containing three or more syllables (polysyllabic) including repetitions. Then use the SMOG Conversion Chart on page 5 to determine the approximate reading level.

Computer programs also are now available to measure reading levels. Whichever method you choose, let your professional judgment rather than the test guide your word choices. For example, while a polysyllabic word like "alcohol" increases the readability score of a document, it is familiar and understandable to most people. Conversely, the two syllable word "triage" is scored as an easy word, although it will be unfamiliar to many readers. Health-related materials often require long, complex words. To keep materials comprehensible, choose simpler words where possible and explain complex words in the text or consider a simple glossary of unfamiliar terms.

4. Write Easy-To-Read Materials

Syllable counts provide only a rough indication of reading level. Other elements of a publication also have a strong impact on readability. Hallmarks of easy-to-read materials are good organization of key points, familiar format, and a simple, clear writing style.

Begin with an outline that progresses logically through the key points. A common mistake is to believe that the only logical progression of information is from general to specific. For instance, a fact sheet about cocaine abuse might begin with statistics about the prevalence of overall drug abuse in the United States and the prevalence of cocaine abuse among different population groups, continue with information on the risk factors associated with cocaine use, and conclude with a strong message to stay away from cocaine. While this approach is logical, it may not be persuasive or appropriate for the target audience. For different audiences, different organizational structures should be used. For Hispanics, a more effective outline might be (1) Hispanics' pride in their culture, (2) how Hispanics have solved other problems, (3) the need for Hispanics to tackle alcohol tobacco, and other drug abuse issues, and (4) specifically what Hispanics must do.

After organization, one of the hardest parts of preparing materials is to limit the amount of information presented. However, limiting text to the main points is an excellent way to improve message comprehension. Give the readers what they need to know to act. Delete all information that is just nice to know. Cramming too much information into a publication turns readers off.

Increase comprehension further by speaking to your audience in simple, familiar language. If you've conducted focus groups or know your audience well, you should know how they refer to drugs, abusers, and other related topics. To be most effective, write simply and tailor your publication to the target group. Let your research guide the style and tone of your publication. For example, while a conversational style works well for many young people, formal grammar may be expected by older people for serious health-related materials. Similarly, carefully test any humor you expect to include. Some audiences may believe you have to take the subject seriously while others feel that a little humor helps break through denial.

Also, use familiar examples, personal experiences, and/or characters with whom the audience can relate. Personalize the information. Explain the consequences of certain behaviors by telling a person's story rather than by simply describing the risks associated with drug abuse. Make the action you want them to take very clear and logical given their experiences.

Case Study:

Debbie's Story

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics as an intervention site for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse prevention education. To get the prevention message across, agency staff developed a publication for WIC counselors to use during their sessions with pregnant clients. Instead of listing the risks of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse to the developing baby, the brochure begins with a young woman describing her drug use and the disastrous

effects it had on her unborn child. She directly confronts the myth that "it can't happen to me" and urges other expectant mothers to avoid her mistake. Written at a low reading level, the brochure delivers a powerful, effective message.

Here are some other tips to help improve writing:

- **Use active voice.** "Most fourth graders don't try wine coolers" works better than "Wine coolers are not tried by most fourth graders."

- **Put your message in the subheadings.** Readers may only scan the headings and subheadings in a publication. Read through to ensure that headlines tell the story without the supporting text. Make sure every topic sentence carries a clear message.

- **Vary sentence length, but keep most sentences fairly short (8 to 10 words).** Longer, natural-sounding sentences (12 to 15 words) can effectively break up the sing-song effect of many short sentences. Keep paragraphs short —they are more inviting and easier to get through than long blocks of text. You also can take advantage of more topic sentences to guide the reader.

- **Summarize frequently and repeat your main points to enhance comprehension.** Help your readers remember your message by reinforcing key points.

- **Use no more than five items in a list.** Use bullets or numbered lists to break up blocks of text. Place key points first and last in lists — and in your writing. That's where your readers will best see and remember them.

Once you have draft materials, you can use focus groups or individual interviews to test their clarity and acceptability with your target audience. While this may seem like a lot of work, pretesting can forestall costly mistakes. It's wise to test graphics as well, since they can enhance or interfere with the impact of your publication.

5. Create Clear Graphics

Present text in a way that enhances readability and use illustrations to reinforce your message. To improve readability:

- **Emphasize important points without detracting from their readability.** Use underlining or bold for emphasis rather than italics or all caps.

- **Help readers by using large, easily readable type.** Serif typefaces (those with small edges on vertical letters) are easier to read than sans serif ("without serif") type. Also, use large type of 12 or 14 points.

> This is 10 pt.
>
> This is 12 pt.
>
> ## This is 14 pt.
>
> ---
>
> Use serif typeface.
>
> **Don't use san serif typeface.**

- **Present information in an inviting format.** Use 40- to 50-character column widths rather than text that goes all the way across the page. Keep the right margin uneven or "ragged" rather than forcing it into a straight (justified) edge. Also, keep a lot of white space on each page. A solid block of text is uninviting to the reader.

- **Don't let graphic elements dilute the impact of your message.** For example, avoid vertical alignment of letters or reverse lettering because they are hard to read. Use highly contrasting colors for paper and ink (i.e., black, brown, or very dark blue ink on white, buff, or yellow paper).

- **Show pictures only of what you want readers to do.** Pictures are remembered — sometimes better than words — so show only the right way to act. Put your message in a caption under each picture. You can even tell a whole story with pictures. For some audiences, this may be preferable to using text.

SMOG Conversion Chart*

Polysyllabic Word Count	Grade Level	Polysyllabic Word Count	Grade Level
0 - 2	4	57 - 72	11
3 - 6	5	73 - 90	12
7 - 12	6	91 - 110	13
13 - 20	7	111 - 132	14
21 - 30	8	133 - 156	15
31 - 42	9	157 - 182	16
43 - 56	10	183 - 210	17
		211 - 240	18

Predicts the grade-level difficulty within 1.5 grades, plus or minus.

Visuals also help convey the message or emphasize specific points, and many readers prefer them to plain text. However, make sure that visuals serve a purpose. Don't use graphics to decorate the page; this distracts the reader. Similarly, exclude extraneous detail. To help the reader focus on the message, use realistic drawings, photos, or human-like figures. Don't use highly stylized or abstract graphics. The audience should be able to identify with the selected visuals, so use characters that look like and sound like the target audience. Keep visuals near the text to which they refer. If you're using colors, don't make all the "bad" things dark and the "good" things light. This may be interpreted as racially offensive. Also, be sensitive to potentially sexist portrayals.

Avoid statistical data, graphs, and complex charts; some readers may have trouble understanding them. And when illustrating a process, keep the steps in order from left to right and top to bottom. Label each step clearly using numbers or arrows to show the progression.

Finally, consider nonprint or multimedia presentations such as audiotapes, posters, or videotapes to replace or accompany complex print materials.

You Can Write and Design for Readers

Writing and designing for the reader is not a guessing game or a matter of luck. Creating educational materials takes careful planning, knowing the audience, and an unwavering focus on the message. The results, however, are well worth the extra effort. Equipped with the five-step process described in this bulletin, you can prepare materials that your audience will read and understand.

Resources

Doaks, Cecilia and Leonard, and Root, Jane H. *Teaching Patients With Low Literacy Skills.* Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1985.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852, (301) 468-2600 or (800) 729-6686. Provides information on the research literature, programs, and educational materials. Also ask about the Regional Alcohol and Drug Awareness Resource (RADAR) network, which may have a resource center in your region.

Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute. *Making Health Communication Programs Work: A Planners Guide,* 1989. This guide to all aspects of health communications, including readability and qualitative research, is available from OCC, Bethesda MD 20892, (301) 496-5583 or (800) 422-6237. This guide also describes the SMOG readability formula and includes sample pretest instruments.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Guidelines: Writing for Adults With Limited Reading Skills,* 1988. Available through the Clearinghouse, Division of Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W., Reporters Building, Room 522, Washington, DC 20202, (202) 732-2396.

Computer software for readability testing:

■ *Rightwriter* by Decisionware Inc., 2033 Wood Street, Suite 218, Sarasota, FL 33577

■ *Readability* by Berta-Max, Inc., P.O. Box 31849, Seattle, WA 98103-1849.

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